

Faith on the Move: The Urban Spread of the Assembly of God population in Rio de Janeiro (2000–2010)

Raíssa Tavares Cortez *

Master's degree, Graduate Program in Population Studies, Territory, and Public Statistics, National School of Statistical Sciences (ENCE), Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE); Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

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Abstract

This article analyzes the spatial distribution of the Assemblies of God (AG) population in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro between 2000 and 2010, aiming to identify territorial patterns through spatial statistical methods. Drawing on demographic census data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) and a 2023 mapping of Assemblies of God church units, the study employs tools such as Local Indicators of Spatial Association (LISA) and the Bivariate Moran's I Index to explore correlations between the number of adherents and the institutional presence of churches. The findings reveal a shift in the Assemblies of God population from the North Zone to the West Zone of the city, accompanied by clusters of spatial concentration and religious expansion along infrastructural corridors. The territorial dynamics observed are characterized by capillarity, informality, and institutional fragmentation, characteristics that allow the Assembly of God to adapt to the uneven urban fabric of Rio de Janeiro. The article contributes to the Geography of Religion by demonstrating how Pentecostal territoriality intersects with processes of urban inequality, symbolic occupation, and grassroots presence in marginalized areas, emphasizing the relevance of spatial approaches in uncovering hidden religious geographies.

Keywords: Assemblies of God; Pentecostalism; Spatial analysis; Urban geography; Religious territoriality; Rio de Janeiro

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the field of the Geography of Religion has focused on how religious beliefs and practices shape urban space and, conversely, are shaped by it. In Brazil—a country marked by intense religious plurality and a rapidly shifting faith scenario one can observe an ongoing process of religious transition, particularly evidenced by the rise of evangelical groups, especially those of Pentecostal orientation. Among them, the Assemblies of God (AG) stands out as the largest evangelical denomination in the country, whose growth has occurred in a diffuse, decentralized manner, often remaining invisible to formal mechanisms of institutional registration.

Pentecostals affiliated with the Assemblies of God churches are so numerous and significant within Brazil's religious demographics that they are commonly referred to by a specific term: *assembleianos*. In other words, more than simply identifying as Pentecostals, these individuals belong to the Assemblies of God. They are part of its community and its historical trajectory in the country. It is important to note that there is no single, unified Assemblies of God church in Brazil; rather, this designation encompasses a wide range of churches that span from classical Pentecostalism to strands influenced by Brazilian Neopentecostalism. Consequently, these churches are highly diverse, as are their members, who collectively shape a significant portion of Brazil's evangelical population.

* Corresponding author: Raíssa Tavares Cortez

For the purposes of this article, and given the lack of an English term that semantically captures the specificity of these followers, the reader will encounter the Portuguese terms *assembleiano* or *assembleianos* throughout the text, referring to faithful adherents of the Assemblies of God churches in Brazil.

The municipality of Rio de Janeiro, a territory of profound socio-spatial inequalities and birthplace of key Brazilian Assemblies of God ministries, offers a privileged setting for analyzing the territorial expansion of these churches. Over time, Assembly of God has consolidated its presence in various neighborhoods of the city, with emphasis on areas of greater social vulnerability, while also expanding into central regions connected to urban transport and service networks. The logic of establishment of these churches, marked by high capillarity, informality, and territorial plasticity requires analysis into their modes of insertion into urban space through spatial analysis tools.

This paper aims to analyze the spatial distribution of the Assemblies of God population in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro between 2000 and 2010, as well as to identify patterns of territorial association using spatial statistical methods. Drawing on data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) demographic censuses and the mapping of Assemblies of God units in 2023, tools such as the Local Indicators of Spatial Association (LISA) and the Bivariate Moran's I Index were employed to identify clusters, outliers, and spatial correlations between the presence of adherents and the location of churches. The analysis also considers the relationship between the spatial distribution of the Assemblies of God and structural aspects of the city, such as transport networks and informal settlements.

The paper seeks to contribute to the deepening of discussions on religion and territory, highlighting how the expansion dynamics of the Assemblies of God intertwine with urban processes of fragmentation and accessibility. The analysis thus aims to reveal whether there is an underlying order to the apparent disorder of Assemblies of God spatial occupation in Rio de Janeiro, and which factors influence this logic of religious territorialization.

2. Material and methods

This study adopts a quantitative and spatial analytical approach to investigate the territorial dynamics of the Assemblies of God in the city of Rio de Janeiro between the years 2000 and 2010. The methodological framework is based on the use of demographic census microdata provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), combined with geospatial techniques and cartographic representation to explore the spatial distribution of the Assembly of God population and the location of church units.

2.1. Spatial and Temporal Scope

The territorial focus of the research is the municipality of Rio de Janeiro, selected due to its historical relevance in the trajectory of Pentecostalism in Brazil and its complex urban fabric, characterized by significant socio-spatial disparities. The temporal scope encompasses the decade between the 2000 and 2010 censuses, a period of notable growth in evangelical affiliation and the diversification of religious landscapes in Brazilian metropolises.

2.2. Data Sources

Two primary data sources were used:

- IBGE Demographic Censuses (2000 and 2010) – microdata from the sample questionnaires, which include religious affiliation and place of residence at the level of weighting areas, a territorial unit constructed by IBGE for the purpose of statistical estimation.
- Assemblies of God locations (2023) – addresses of church units were collected through official websites of the main AG ministries in Rio de Janeiro (including Madureira, Campo Grande, and Vitória em Cristo) and cross-verified with geographic data from OpenStreetMap and Google Maps to ensure precision.

2.3. Variables and Processing

The main variable of interest was the total number of residents affiliated with the Assemblies of God in each area of the Rio de Janeiro City, as reported in the census years. These values were spatially distributed and normalized to represent proportions relative to the total population. For 2023, the physical locations of churches were geocoded and aggregated by neighborhood to allow for spatial comparison with census data from 2010. A compatibility procedure was carried out to relate the 2010 census weighting areas with the official administrative neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, enabling the spatialization of demographic data at a finer and more policy-relevant scale.

2.4. Spatial Analysis Techniques

The spatial analysis was conducted using the following techniques:

- Univariate Local Moran's I (LISA): was employed to identify spatial clusters and outliers in the distribution of the Assembly of God population (*assembleianos*) in the municipality across the 2000 and 2010 datasets.
- Bivariate Local Moran's I: applied to explore the spatial correlation between the number of Assemblies of God adherents in 2010 and the number of churches mapped in 2023, highlighting areas where high concentrations of believers coincide with institutional presence.
- Spatial weight matrix ("queen" contiguity): adopted to define neighborhood relations among spatial units, taking into account all shared borders and corners.

In the Local Moran's I index, the the resulting output is categorized into four types:

- High-High: Indicates the spatial clustering of high values located near other high values.
- Low-Low: Denotes a similar clustering pattern, where low values are situated near other low values.
- High-Low: Represents high values that are spatial outliers, as they are surrounded by low values and therefore do not form a cluster. These observations deviate significantly from the local mean.
- Low-High: Refers to low values located in areas predominantly composed of high values, also qualifying as spatial outliers.

It is important to note that some data points may not fall into any of these four categories. These typically appear unclassified on the map and are not represented within the color ramp of the cluster typology. All spatial analyses were conducted using GeoDa (for the calculation of Moran's I and the identification of spatial clusters) and ArcGIS (for map construction and data visualization).

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework

The expansion of Pentecostalism in Brazil has drawn growing attention from scholars concerned with the spatialization of religion and the production of urban territories through faith-based practices. The Assemblies of God (AG), as the largest Pentecostal denomination in the country, exemplifies a model of religious growth marked by spatial informality, institutional fragmentation, and adaptive territorial strategies[1, 2, 3, 4].

The spatial logic of Pentecostal churches, particularly the AG, is defined as "informal and ephemeral" [1] characterized by a lack of centralized planning, flexible territorial arrangements, and the capacity to rapidly occupy or vacate urban spaces such as residential units, garages, and commercial properties. These features challenge conventional notions of religious institutionalization, suggesting a form of territorial occupation that is both diffuse and deeply rooted in local sociabilities.

Fajardo [2] adds that the AG must be understood as a set of autonomous ministries rather than a singular centralized entity. Each ministry such as the *Madureira* and *Vitória em Cristo* branches operates with full administrative independence, enabling diversified growth strategies and fostering what the author calls "a structured fragmentation." [2]. This autonomy facilitates territorial expansion into areas with varying socio-economic profiles, reinforcing the adaptability of the denomination across different urban morphologies.

The notion of a Pentecostal *aggiornamento* [4] exists to describe the denomination's transition into the contemporary urban scene. This *aggiornamento* refers to the ways Pentecostal churches, including the Assembly of God, have embraced modern technologies, consumer aesthetics, and new forms of visibility to expand beyond their traditional bases among the urban poor [4]. Such transformation enables these churches to compete for symbolic and physical space across the entire city, including middle- and upper-class neighborhoods.

In the context of Rio de Janeiro, the spatial spread of Assembly of God churches reflects broader patterns of religious urbanization. As Alencar [5] argues, the Assembly of God is "present in all urban centers but absent in urban decision-making," a paradox that underlines its grassroots territorial reach and political marginality. The denomination's high presence in favelas and peripheral zones is not merely a by-product of social exclusion, but a deliberate strategy of proximity and embeddedness in territories historically neglected by the state [6, 7].

There are studies that support the idea that the religious transition in Brazil, particularly the decline of Catholicism and the rise of Pentecostalism, is spatially uneven and strongly associated with processes of internal migration, socio-

economic vulnerability, and the informal urban fabric [8, 9]. The concept of religious mobility [8], both spiritual and geographic, is crucial to understanding how the Assemblies of God adapts to the changing urban environment.

In fact, the literature suggests that the Assemblies of God's expansion should not be interpreted merely through institutional metrics but rather through spatialized logics of proximity, informality, and symbolic anchoring. The spatial distribution of these churches reflects a dynamic interplay between faith, territory, and urban inequality, demanding analytical tools capable of capturing their fluid and multiscale presence in the city.

4. Results

The Municipality of Rio de Janeiro is a territory marked by significant religious diversity, serving simultaneously as a stage for both secularization and faith, for Carnival and the March for Jesus. The choice to delimit the spatial focus to the municipal level stems from the theoretical framework of political geography, in which the Municipality is conceived as both a territory and a locus "of access to public policies" [10]. Municipalities, along with their internal subdivisions defined by local government in the case of Rio de Janeiro, currently comprising 163 neighborhoods constitute the physical spaces where everyday life unfolds.

In the case of the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro, the historical trajectories of the city and the Assembly of God intersect. The first official Assembly of God church in the state of Rio de Janeiro was established in the city of Rio de Janeiro in the São Cristóvão neighborhood, in 1911. Over the course of 112 years of presence in Rio de Janeiro, Pentecostalism has undergone several transformations, and the Assembly of God has played a central role in shaping the Pentecostal religious identity of the city, particularly its urban dimension.

The following map (Figure1) illustrates the spatial distribution of the Assembleia de Deus population in the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro for the years 2000 and 2010, based on dot density mapping.

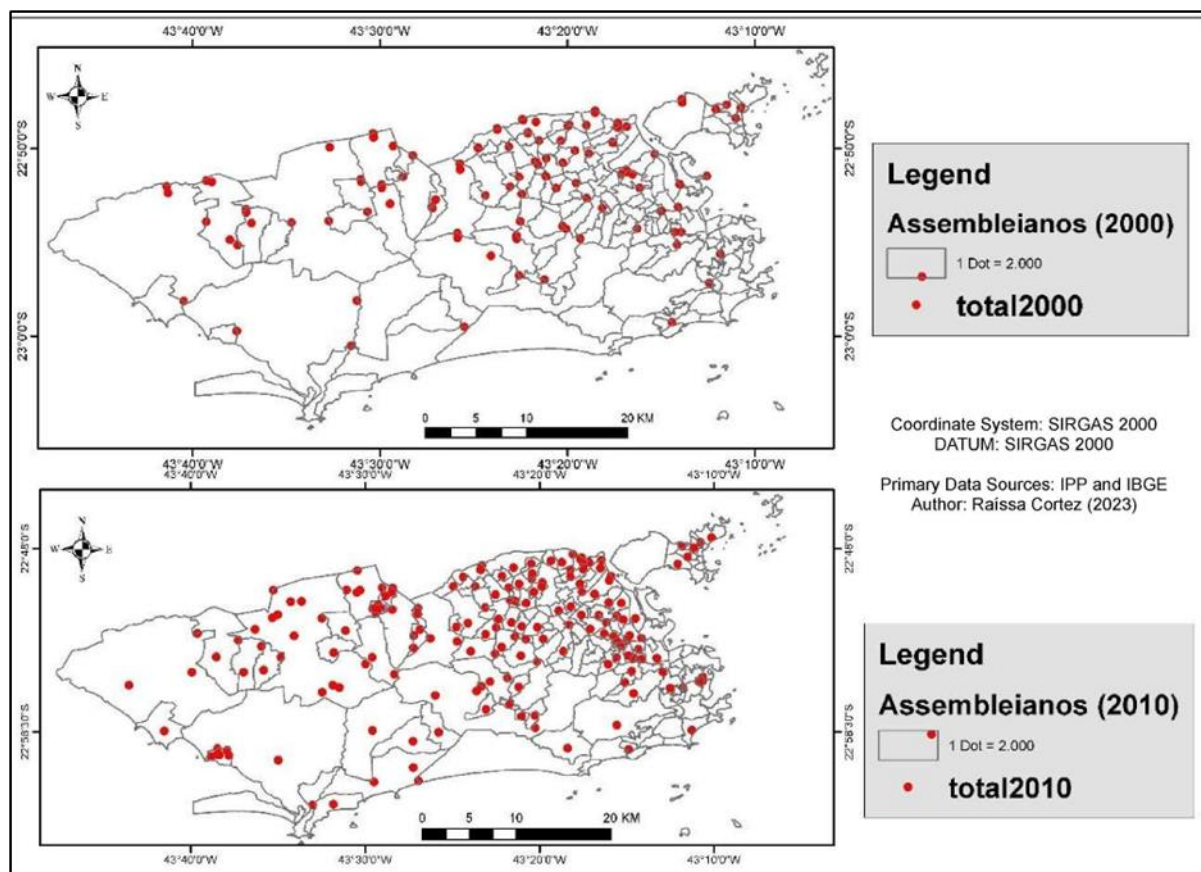


Figure 1 The distribution of the Assemblies of God population for the years 2000 and 2010 – Source: 2000 and 2010 Demographic Census Microdata/IBGE

For this reason, the spatial analyses presented here are consistently grounded in dialogues centered on the Municipality and its neighborhoods. In some cases, the analyses draw on the spatial divisions established by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – IBGE) for the census tract aggregations used in the 2010 Census.

Each dot represents 2,000 individuals who identify as Evangelical Christians of Pentecostal origin and as members of an Assembly of God church. As seen on the map, the number of red dots increases from 2000 to 2010. Furthermore, their density grows not only in the North Zone (Zona Norte) but especially in the West Zone (Zona Oeste) of Rio de Janeiro.

Using the open-source software GeoDa, a comparative cartogram was developed to analyze the Assemblies of God population in 2000 and 2010, treating these years as distinct temporal variables. The analysis employed the differential Moran's I, which assesses the covariance between the two time points, weighted by a spatial contiguity matrix. The high-low and low-high clusters, identified as outliers, correspond to areas with isolated growth amid declines (Figure 2).

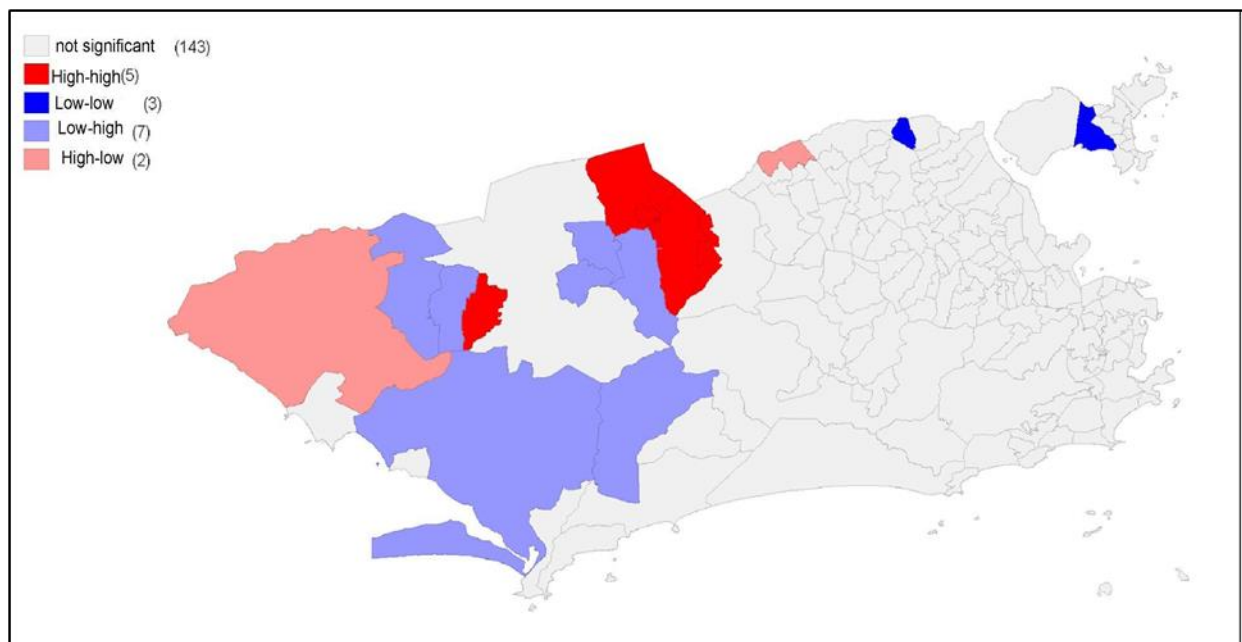


Figure 2 Cartogram of the total Assemblies of God population for the years 2000–2010 Source: 2000 and 2010 Demographic Census Microdata/IBGE

Although the local Moran's I coefficient (0.075) indicates a positive spatial autocorrelation, its magnitude is low. Nevertheless, the spatio-temporal analysis reveals a shift in the Assemblies of God population from the North Zone to the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro City, with the latter showing statistical significance during the period under review.

The dark blue areas, corresponding to the "low-low" category, indicate a decline in the total number of Assemblies of God followers from the year 2000 to 2010.

The dark red areas, corresponding to the "high-high" category, indicate an increase in the total number of Assemblies of God followers from 2000 to 2010. A cluster is observed, as neighboring areas also experienced an above-average increase.

The only neighborhood displaying a high-low spatial pattern is Santa Cruz, suggesting that in 2000 it had a higher number of Assemblies of God followers than in 2010, in contrast to the surrounding areas. Neighborhoods classified under the low-high category include Paciência, Cosmos, Guaratiba, Vargem Grande, Senador Camará, Senador Vasconcelos, and Santíssimo, all located in the West Zone (Zona Oeste). These areas experienced an increase in their Assemblies of God population over the period.

This apparent migration from the North Zone to the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro may be associated with the demographic expansion of the latter. According to a study by Araujo and Cortado [11], the West Zone experienced a

16.8% increase in its overall population between 2000 and 2010, which contributed to its urban growth. Their analysis, based on Administrative Regions (territorial units defined by the municipal government) found that the Barra da Tijuca Administrative Region, particularly the neighborhoods of Vargem Pequena and Curicica, showed the most significant demographic growth during that decade.

The high-high cluster, indicated in red, comprises neighborhoods where the increase in Assemblies of God followers was spatially concentrated and mirrored by adjacent areas. The clustered neighborhoods—Bangu, Padre Miguel, Vila Kennedy, and Geracino—are all part of the “Greater Bangu” area and fall within the Bangu Administrative Region. The neighborhood of Bangu holds historical significance in the trajectory of the Assemblies of God in Rio de Janeiro, as one of the first churches of the denomination in the city was founded there [12]. Since its inception, the Assemblies of God has also maintained a presence in socially vulnerable areas and correctional facilities [12].

The relationship between the number of churches in the City of Rio de Janeiro, distributed across neighborhoods, and the number of Assemblies of God followers reveals a fascinating dynamic that reflects the complexity of this denomination’s territorial expansion. When examining the spatial distribution of Assemblies of God churches in relation to the population density of their followers across different neighborhoods, intriguing patterns emerge that highlight the interconnection between religion and the urban geography of the city.

In this context, exploring the correlation between the presence of Assemblies of God followers and the number of churches per neighborhood offers valuable insights into how this population engages with faith across the social and spatial fabric of Rio de Janeiro. For this reason, the analysis returns to spatial methods, specifically through the application of the bivariate Local Moran’s I (Figure 3). This statistical approach aims not only to assess the relationship between the number of followers and the number of churches but also to identify specific patterns of spatial clustering that may underlie this complex association.

The use of the bivariate Local Moran’s I allows for a more refined exploration of the spatial autocorrelation between these two variables, helping to elucidate potential areas of significant concentration of Assemblies of God followers and churches within the scope of this study. It is for this reason that the decision was made to resume the spatial analysis using the Bivariate Local Moran’s I Index (Figure 3). By employing this statistical approach, the aim was not only to understand the relationship between the presence of Assemblies of God adherents and the number of churches in the neighborhoods, but also to identify specific spatial clustering patterns that may underlie this complex relationship. The use of the Bivariate Local Moran’s I Index allows for a more in-depth exploration of the spatial autocorrelation of these variables and helps to shed light on potential areas of significant concentration of Assemblies of God evangelicals and churches in our study.

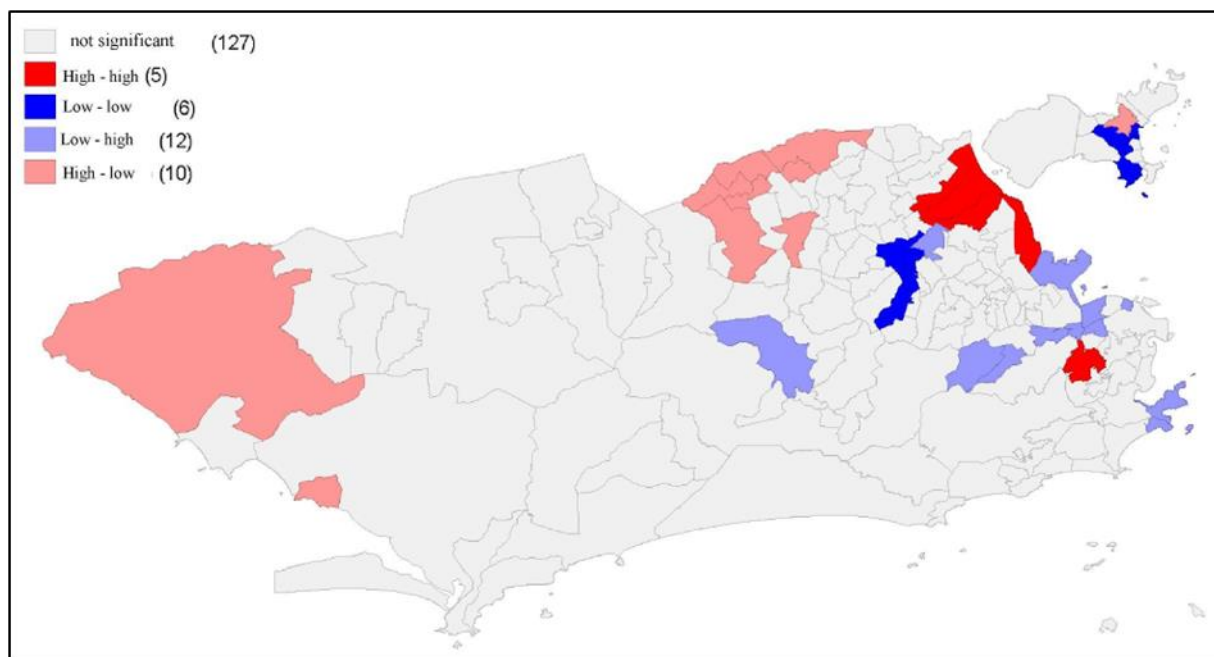


Figure 3 The total number of Assemblies of God adherents in 2010 vs. the total number of Assemblies of God churches in 2023. Source: 2010 Demographic Census Microdata/IBGE

The High-Low and Low-High areas represent transitional zones that stand out in the analysis. The High-Low clusters, highlighted in pink, correspond to areas with a high number of Assemblies of God adherents but a relatively low number of associated churches. Notable examples of such areas include neighborhoods located in the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro, particularly Santa Cruz, Campo Grande, and Guaratiba, as well as parts of the North Zone, especially those bordering other municipalities within the Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan Region. Conversely, the Low-High clusters, shown in light blue, indicate outlier areas where the population of Assemblies of God adherents is below the average, yet the number of Assemblies of God churches is above the average when compared to their surrounding areas.

5. Discussion

The territorial expansion of Pentecostal churches in Brazil, particularly the Assemblies of God, cannot be fully understood without considering their historical roots, institutional structure, and adaptive engagement with urban dynamics. Rather than acting as a centralized religious body, the Assembly of God operates through a decentralized network of ministries, allowing for great spatial flexibility and institutional fluidity. This “fragmented unity” is not a sign of organizational weakness but a strategic adaptation that enables widespread presence across the Brazilian urban landscape [3, 13].

The rise of Pentecostalism, especially since the early 20th century has coincided with important demographic shifts and urbanization processes in Brazil. The Assemblies of God, originating in Belém do Pará in 1911, soon expanded toward major urban centers like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, often accompanying migratory flows of marginalized populations [14]. In this sense, the church grew as it followed the movement of the people, embedding itself in informal neighborhoods, favelas, and peripheries historically neglected by the state [6, 7].

The AG’s success in urban territories is due in part to its “pulverized expansion,” a term used by Machado [1] to describe the denomination’s informal, non-linear growth. Lacking rigid hierarchies or a central governance model, Assembly of God congregations may emerge or disappear rapidly, often occupying spaces such as house garages, commercial fronts, or vacant lots. This informality allows the church to adapt to constant changes in the urban fabric, while fostering strong local ties through mutual support networks among members [15].

From a spatial perspective, Assembly of God churches often mirror broader processes of urban expansion and infrastructural development. For instance, in Rio de Janeiro, the presence of AG units along transport corridors—such as BRT (Bus Rapid Transit): a public transport system using articulated buses that operate on exclusive lanes, with level boarding and off-board fare collection, designed to provide faster and more efficient urban mobility). Lanes, train tracks, and highway networks, suggests a deliberate territorial strategy aimed at maximizing accessibility and visibility [8]. The church’s capacity to insert itself into both high-density peripheral areas and newly urbanized zones such as the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro reflects its dynamic understanding of space and opportunity [16].

Moreover, the spatial spread of Assembly of God churches does not follow a uniform pattern. Instead, it reflects a mosaic of localized initiatives influenced by urban inequality, demographic shifts, and religious pluralism. The AG grows while fragmenting, often resisting full institutional mapping due to its decentralized and sometimes ephemeral presence. As Cortez [16] observes, the urban landscape of Rio de Janeiro is punctuated by AG congregations of various sizes and affiliations, which frequently lack visible institutional ties among themselves, although they are united under a shared Pentecostal ethos.

This distributed model of expansion challenges traditional paradigms of religious institutionalization and demands new theoretical lenses. The concept of territorial informality [17] becomes useful to analyze religious actors that operate outside formalized state structures yet hold deep territorial significance. Likewise, Castro’s [10] notion of the municipality as the locus of political access and citizenship helps frame the relevance of neighborhood-scale religious occupation as a form of local territorial agency.

In this context, spatial analysis emerges as a powerful tool for uncovering hidden religious geographies and understanding how Pentecostalism, and the Assemblies of God in particular, shape and are shaped by the city. The church’s territorial logic thus embodies a dialogical relationship between faith, mobility, infrastructure, and urban inequality.

6. Conclusion

The spatial analysis using the Bivariate Local Moran's I Index provides valuable insights into the relationship between Assemblies of God adherents and the number of churches across different areas of the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro. The results reveal distinct patterns of spatial association in the North and West Zones compared to the South Zone, reinforcing the hypothesis that there has been an increase in the Assemblies of God population in neighborhoods of the West Zone, to the detriment of certain neighborhoods in the North Zone.

Spatial analysis allows for a deeper understanding of the geographic distribution of the Assemblies of God population over time and enables comparative perspectives. However, it is important to emphasize that the Moran's I Index alone does not allow for causal inferences between population and church presence, nor can it explain the specific reasons for a higher concentration of adherents in one area over another.

The spatial analysis of the Assemblies of God (AG) population in the municipality of Rio de Janeiro between 2000 and 2010, combined with the 2023 mapping of church units, revealed meaningful patterns of territorial association between religious adherents and institutional presence. The results drawn from the Bivariate Moran's I Index point to a spatial correlation between the density of AG followers and the distribution of churches, particularly in the West Zone, which has emerged as a focal point of expansion, in contrast to certain areas of the North Zone, where a relative decline is observed.

Beyond the identification of spatial clusters, this study demonstrated how the Assemblies of God deploys a territorial logic rooted in capillarity, informality, and adaptability to the evolving urban fabric. Its expansion unfolds not through centralized planning, but through a fragmented and multiscale dynamic that responds to patterns of urbanization, infrastructural development, and entrenched socio-spatial inequalities. The denomination's enduring presence in socially vulnerable areas, coupled with its use of flexible, often precarious spaces, points to a strategic form of occupation that both compensates for the absence of the state and fosters localized forms of belonging and community-making.

By integrating spatial statistical methods and geospatial tools with theoretical perspectives from the Geography of Religion and Critical Political Geography, this research sought to illuminate Pentecostal territorialities as dynamic urban phenomena. While the data do not allow for causal inferences, the spatial patterns observed suggest that the growth of the Assemblies of God is closely intertwined with broader urban processes such as intra-urban mobility, territorial fragmentation, and symbolic competition for institutional visibility.

From this perspective, the study highlights the relevance of geographic approaches in examining how religious actors actively reshape urban space. These approaches make it possible to uncover territorialities that remain obscured by conventional statistical frameworks, yet play a crucial role in structuring everyday life and socio-territorial dynamics in contemporary Brazilian cities.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest related to the publication of this manuscript, "Faith on the Move: The Urban Spread of the Assemblies of God in Rio de Janeiro (2000–2010)". The research was conducted independently without any financial or personal relationships that could be perceived to influence the results or interpretation of the findings.

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